

Interview with Dam Thuy Nguyen Hugo, former South Vietnamese refugee rescued during Operation Frequent Wind at the close of the Vietnam War. Mrs. Hugo was embarked aboard the sinking HQ 402, was rescued, and led to Subic Bay by USS *Kirk* (DE-1087). Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, McLean, VA, 27 October 2009.

Please tell me your name.

My name is Dam Thuy Nguyen. I carried the name of the river where I was born. Dam Thuy is the name of the river. It also means pure water. That river runs around the blue mountain. So when my parents were there, my father said, "If we're going to have a boy, he will get the name of the mountain. If it's a girl, the name of the river."

What part of Vietnam is that in?

It's in central Vietnam.

Where were you educated as a young girl?

I was first growing up in Hue and attended a private Catholic school. In my dream, I want to be a doctor but I was really afraid of blood so instead I became a teacher. I was a French teacher at the very prestigious Institute Lasan Taberd in Saigon. It was a school only for boys. Besides the private school where I was teaching, I also taught in the public school. So each day, I was teaching in two schools. I was teaching a couple of years later up until 1974.

My name was sent into the education center and selected one day to be a teacher in West Germany. I would be teaching for the Vietnamese children who live in the village called Peace Village in West Germany. So my name was selected among the four schoolteachers. And at the end, I was selected by the minister of education in Saigon to be the teacher. All the procedures were done and I was ready to study German and also prepared to leave Vietnam in February 1975.

But I was still teaching. The school years always ended on April 14th. So I asked permission to delay so I would be able to finish the school year before I leave for three years. So I was delayed but during that time--March '75--the situation in Vietnam was getting very critical. About March 21st, based on the announcement on the radio station, we lost the Highlands, which is Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, and Kontum to the North.

At the time you were living in . . .

In Saigon. We keep following with the all the information as it was announced on the radio. Everybody was very worried. We didn't know what to do. People keep moving from one place to the other, hoping to find a safer place to live.

In late March, we learned we lost Da Nang, Quang Tri, Hue, and Nha Trang. And the situation was getting really worse. Everybody was looking for a way to get out because we know that we are going to lose our country. My family try to find the right source and buy the way out.

What is the source?

That means the black market to find a way. It's not really legal but someone who can find a way to sell you a way out.

How many were in your family then?

I was born into a family of five. And I'm in the middle of three girls and two boys. By that time, my father was no longer. He passed away in 1960. My mother still remained with four of us because the first one, she marry and leave out of the family. So all of us with some grandchildren remain. So we try to find the source to pay our way out. We find the source and, with another family of four, we pay a lot in gold. They find a way to put us on the airplane on any flight out and we just received the manifest with our name on it. We received it on a paper that looked legal with a flight number. We were to be picked up behind the American embassy's back door at 1:00 o'clock on May 1st. The bus will pick us up and take us to the airport. Then we show the manifest to that flight and leave the country.

They were going to take you to Tan Son Nhut.

Yes. But on the 27th . . . As you know I had already been picked to go to West Germany. So by this time it's April 27th. The notification from the West German embassy send a messenger to my house and ask me to pack and leave country as arranged with the last flight leaving Saigon for Germany.

But this had nothing to do with the source.

No. But at that time, I didn't think it was a good idea for me to leave my family so I decide to drop my chance so I can stay with my family and wait until May 1st. We got the order that there was a 24-hour curfew from April 27th up to 29th.

What was going on in Saigon at that time?

The North Vietnamese soldiers attack everywhere near Saigon all day long from the 27th up to 29th of April. We stayed inside our house. Nobody could go out. All schools were closed as were the banks and offices.

You could hear all this fighting going on?

Yes. There was fighting all around. It was a war! So everybody stay in the house and can't do anything. We were just frightened.

In the early morning of April 30th, the radio officially announced that South Vietnam had been surrendered by Big Minh [Duong Van Minh]¹ and everybody look at each other and say, "That's the end of it." But our family still hope with the manifest that we still had that the next day, May 1st, we'd still be able leave the country.

So you were supposed to go behind the American embassy and a bus was to pick you up.

Yes. But we were not allowed to get out from the house. We were impatient and I didn't know what to do. I said, "We're gonna die." I discussed with my family members. I said, "We have to find a way individually to get out and will meet at the Lasard Taberd Institute." That place is

¹Duong Van Minh, the Vietnamese general who led the coup in 1963 that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem as president of South Vietnam and later became the republic's last president for a few days before North Vietnamese troops stormed his palace in Saigon.

very close to the U.S. embassy so we could go the next day. Together we can rendezvous and leave.

So you thought the best way was for each of you to get out of the house individually and you would have a better chance. And you would all rendezvous at the school. And from there you get to the place where you would meet the bus.

Yes. But it was still very difficult. Our next door neighbors, who were our friends before . . . but we noticed at that time that they were connected to the communists so they know who we are. And they watch us. So after we arrange with our plan to go, suddenly I open the door and go out. I walk right up to the communist soldier who is standing there and I tried to make friends with him and say hello to him. I say, "Hello, welcome. How are you?" I just pretend to know him well and I'm happy to see him.

Was he a North Vietnamese soldier or a VC?

No. He's a VC.

So you knew him?

Yes. I knew him before. So I kept talking with him. I saw he had a bunch of guns on his body and also carrying a communist flag. He was also looking for a place to hang it up. Right away that's a good reason for me to flatter him. "Now let me help you find a good place to hang this flag up. How about let me do it?"

And he gave the flag to me and I try to find a place around the corner my house and I hang it up and I say, "Don't you think it look nice up there?" I just pretend nothing happen. And he said, "Yes, it's looks nice." Then I said, "To be honest with you, I don't feel well. There's been a lot of shooting and I feel very nervous. I need to go to hospital nearby to have a checkup and get some medicine to calm me down, if you don't mind. Then I come back. I live here." Actually, I helped his nephew before at my school so he remembered me.

He talked to the other soldier standing in front of my house and said, "Okay, I think we can let her go. She live here. I know her." I then said, "Okay, I just need to go inside and get people to take me to the hospital." I walked inside and I linking eyes with my family and said, "Come on. Let's try to get out."

And I took my nephew. He is the first grandson of my family. Right away, I think about him. He must go with me. And I grab him and said, "Let's go." We got out and chauffeur got the car and took us to the hospital. We got out that gate.

Just you and your nephew?

Yes. Just for a start. We went straight to the school where I taught, and waited there. We had left home around 10:30 and we waited 'til noon. We didn't see any member of our family show up. So we keep waiting until noon when we started seeing all the North Vietnamese soldiers' tanks driving around the front of our school around the corner of the Saigon cathedral and post office and big offices around there. And they ran over people and killed them. I looked back and realized it was too late to wait any longer. Then I said, I have to be brave and I told my nephew, "Let's go." And we jumped in the car and drove around the city. Actually we don't

know where to go but we drove around and saw people running around. Finally some men in a car waved and said, "Follow me." We followed with several cars following behind me like a parade along the river shore and then into the Vietnamese navy camp along the Saigon River.

Then the car ahead of me stopped and people got out and run down to the shore and jump onto one boat. My nephew and I ran after them but the boat was high, too high to jump up onto. But we did climb up and I saw the number 402 on it. I call it our destiny boat. Oh my God! There must have been more than 1,500 people on the boat.² And everybody just stood there looking at each other not knowing what to do.

Then we found out the boat cannot move because it is there to be repaired. The boat was tied with big electric cables and no one can do anything with it. How to get it away from the shore? But finally they made it. The brain is really something when we're faced with something.

Then a miracle came. Someone used something to cut the cable and there were sparks everywhere. We were so scared but enjoyed seeing it because we knew we were going to make it.

Someone on that boat took charge. Were they Vietnamese navy people?

All kinds--Army, Air Force, Navy, civilians, women, children--all kinds. One lady was carrying two baskets as if she were selling something and she jumped on the boat with us. And she doesn't know why she's there.

Finally the boat was released from the cable but how to move because there was no electricity for steering.³ Some senior officers established themselves immediately right on the boat and that impressed me. Who is the leader? Who is the commander? And that person stood on the deck to give order and they made all the men on the boat get in line on two sides of the wheel and that commander give the order: "20 degrees left" and everybody climbing and steering the wheel. And the boat is shaking like this and moving backward because it couldn't turn with the engine. So they just back up that way to move.

So the boat was going backwards down the river?

Yes. Not really 20 degrees yet and immediately the commander order "40 degrees right." The boat is really heavy to steer and the boys peeled the skin off their hands when they turned the wheel and they sweat and collapse. And the other crew replace them. And they keep doing that.

²*Lam Giang* (HQ-402) was a World War II-era U.S. Navy assault landing craft (LSM). Just over 200 feet in length, the ship normally had a complement of 50 sailors and five officers. Wedged on deck and in every available space that day were an estimated 5,000 people.

³The motors that drove the big steering units would not work so the makeshift crew had jury-rigged the rudder to try to get it amidships but they could not. The rudder kept flopping back and forth. The landing craft was also a twin-screw vessel, and with only one engine functioning, it was driving only one of the propellers, which made steering even more difficult.

So they were able to turn the boat around.

No. They kept going down the river backward.

All the way down the Saigon River backwards?

Yes. That's why we got away safe because the communist tank was facing us from Rue Catinat, the main road facing out on the Saigon River ready to shoot at anything they weren't happy with. Someone suggested they use something white to hang up as a sign of surrender and we will be safe. A soldier took off his white t-shirt and hung it from something at the back of the boat. All the communist soldiers from that tank looked out and saw the backward boat with the white t-shirt. So we just moved slowly, slowly past them but inside it's killing us awaiting them to shoot at us with each moment.

By then it was already getting dark. When we left the Navy base on the Saigon River it was already 4:30 or 5:00. As we went down the river, people in small boats came out to us and more people climbed on. We finally got down to Vung Tau but the water kept coming and coming into the boat because that was the condition of the boat. They passed around a helmet

As I recall, the problem was that the doors on 402 were defective and wouldn't close properly.

Yes. And nobody brought any food with them. But someone stole some rice and kept it on the boat and brought it out later to sell.

Did you have water?

Yes, but I don't know where they got it. We had very little and we passed it around. That night they tried to get a helmet and pots and pans to help bail the water out but the water that came in was more than what we get out. It was hard to make a chain to try to throw the water out. But we survive. The water inside also mixed with oil.

You were out in the ocean at this point.

Yes, and we were moving through the water like a snake and we didn't know where we were going. When we were out a way, someone brought along a small radio and the we heard that the North Vietnamese found out that the boat 402 was stolen so they ordered us to return. And everyone on the boat screamed together, "No way!" A surgeon on board carried with him a signal book. He tried to find a way to contact another boat to ask for rescue.

At night it was so dark but someone had a flashlight and another woman had a small mirror for makeup. He used that small mirror and the flashlight to make a signal to another boat. Whoever out there would get the message that we needed rescue.

So there was no radio aboard with which to communicate?

No, just the radio for hearing the news broadcasts.

What happened? Did someone see your signal?

Yes, a Vietnamese boat saw it and the next morning we got three other boats around us and rescued us. We had to divide and go into three boats because there were too many of us for one boat. My nephew was 13 years old and a tiny boy. And I'm little and never did any sports or anything like that.

How old were you then?

I was almost 30. Everybody came up on deck hoping to jump onto the other boat. But the two boats were jumping up and down and hitting against each other. When the two boats came close together, someone on the other boat said, "Throw that boy over; I will catch him." And I say no. If we miss, he will drop down and that's the end of it. It's too scary. I stood there very confused. And he said, "Come on, throw him over." And I turn around and I find a piece of rope and I tie him to me. And I said, "No I have to do this, please. If anything happen then we both go." The soldier on the other boat said again. "You have to hurry, we don't have time."

So when the boat come very close . . . and also my nephew, he was a very brave boy, and he start to jump over. And then the other two men standing there catch him.

But he was hooked to you.

Yes, but the people were holding me back but the rope is long enough. Then, my turn. Then I jumped over. I didn't know anything after that because my soul is out from my body.

Your soul was out from your body?

I was so scared.

Do you remember what boat that was.

I think it was 403.⁴ I was sitting there like I was in outter space. I was just sitting there and shaking then I break down and cry. I say, "We'll never see our family again." So I start crying but then I talk to myself. Now my nephew is counting on me. I'm everything to him. He will be the last person to carry on my family name. So I have no choice but to protect him. No more crying. Then I did. Finally gave us some rice and *nguc mam*. I found a ration box and kept the fish sauce in that.

It was very hot on the deck and I tried to hide under a lifeboat to keep the sun off. I also tried to hide the fish sauce but the sun made it evaporate. It was like losing a diamond. I kept looking at the empty can with nothing but salt left in the bottom. Finally, we got with many other boats, and went to Subic.

Did you ever see the *Kirk*?

No, I could not see it.

Before you arrived in Subic, the *Kirk* put sailors on each of the Vietnamese ships to take command of them. Did you see the Vietnamese flag being lowered?

When we arrived near Subic, we were all called up to the deck and ready to lower the flag and ready to salute it for the last time. To be honest with you, I was born up to that time and we were always singing the national anthem. We salute the flag but just do it and it never carry any meaning. But now as I watched them lower the flag slowly, I cry like a baby. We'll never see it again. We have to say goodbye to our own flag. And that means we lost our land. I look around

⁴It was the Vietnamese navy flagship *Tran Nhat Duat* (HQ-3).

and everyone was crying. And I believe everyone was feeling the same way. It was painful, and up until now I can't explain the meaning of why I cry. I feel loss--familyless now, countryless, everything all gone. We lost our land. Why? But now we're ready for the next step.

Whatever it is.

But don't know what it is. It's now time to get off the boat. We're in Subic now. So we walked through the gate and did all the procedures that had to be done. Then we transferred to a big, commercial ship to Guam. That ship was really big. There were three levels. We were on the top deck. Each day on that ship we got one apple for the two of us. And I cut it in half. I don't want to give my nephew a big piece because it might spoil him.

What happened when you got to Guam?

We were sent to the tent section where we shared a tent with another family. The two of us live in the tent with one mattress. Many people end up in that area. We start lining up at 7 in the morning to get food in the hot sun with flies and dust. But we have no choice.

How many people were in each tent?

There were two families in each tent. There were the two of us and four in the other family.

You didn't know anyone. Everyone was a stranger.

Yes, and it was really scary. My nephew was a spoiled brat at home. But now he became my protector. We lean on each other. We have to get in line to receive the food. We got the paper plates but they were very thin so they just flopping around. Every time the truck carrying the water for the camp pass by there was dust in everything. I arrange with my nephew and we both agree that we would just get one meal for both of us and we'd use one plate to cover the other to keep the dust and flies out. They would scoop one ball of wet rice and some fishy fish. They thought Asian people like to eat fish so the fish was so fishy. I have to use tabasco sauce to make it so I could eat it. Then we take the plate up on the hill under the tree and we'd eat that scoop of rice.

Then we tried to contact my aunt in Paris through the Red Cross because I remembered her address. So I tried to send the letter and got her response. She sent me some money through the Red Cross and also told me to be patient and go on with the American system because it was better than going to France. I took that advice and about three weeks later, we moved to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. That was the best camp I was in.

We went there by airplane--Pan Am. They served wonderful meals on the airplane, chicken. I almost didn't want to swallow it because it would be all gone. Then we went to the camp and the situation was better. They had a bus system so you could ride around the camp to visit whoever we wanted, to go to the Red Cross, or whatever. So we live there and wait for our sponsorship to get out of the camp.

My aunt in Paris contacted another cousin who lived down in Fort Worth, Texas, who lived there for four years. So they look and found the sponsor from the Catholic church for me. When I heard that one family in Texas wanted to sponsor us I sat down with my nephew and said, "How can we ride a horse when we get to Texas?"

You'd heard that they all rode horses down there?

When we were back home we watched movies where they chased cows and wore boots. And my nephew asked, "What about me? I'm small. How can I climb on a horse?" We were both so worried about the new life. How will we fit in?

Then the time came when we had to leave the camp and go to Texas. We were afraid to get out and look after we landed. As we were getting off the plane, I looked out and I saw cars parking around and I screamed like a crazy woman. I turned to my nephew and said, "They have cars! They have cars!" People looked at me as if I had lost my mind. I was so happy.

Then we joined the sponsor family and they came and had already rented a place for us and we live there day by day. Then I wonder how we will survive because I need to make a living. And to be honest with you, never, ever do I want an open hand to receive assistance. I was a very high class teacher and I'm ready to do whatever to make a living for my nephew and myself.

The second week I went to the bank across from my house and tried to look in the telephone book. You never can believe my hard head. I opened the yellow book and looked around and who do you think I'm looking for? The head of personnel of the education center. And I put the money in the pay phone and called him.

You spoke English at that time?

I spoke English with a French accent, a German accent, a Vietnamese accent, mixed up like a salad. Because I studied English.

So picked up the phone and called him. He answered and said, "Who is this?"

I said, "It's me. My name is Thuy. I want to see you."

"I don't think I know you. What do you want to see me about?"

"When I see you, then I'll tell you."

He was kind of curious so he said, "When do you want to see me?"

I said, "You tell me."

So he gave me the time. I asked my sponsor to take me to see that director. When I went inside, he sees an Oriental girl with long hair and he said, "Are you Miss Thuy?" I said, "Yes." And then invited me into his office. He said, "Please sit down. Now tell me why you want to see me."

"I want a job."

"What kind of job?"

I say, "I was a teacher and I want teaching job."

"But getting a license here is hard, you know."

"Well when I ran away from home, I didn't bring anything."

He wants to kick me out in a very polite way so he went to his desk and took out a bunch of papers. "How about I give you this test and see what capacity you can handle. If you pass it you can teach."

I said, "Okay."

So he took me out to a corner with a small desk sitting next to the secretary. But it was easy because he had the test with the boxes to check. So I read the questions and I checked. He gave me one hour but I finished in 40 minutes. Then I just stood up and gave it to the secretary. She then gave it to the boss. He asked her, "Did you help her or something?" He then asked me to come into his office and sit down. He then said, "Did someone help you through this test?"

I said, "Why did you ask me that?"

He said, "It seemed the way you talk and the way you did your test. It seems it pass through good."

I said, "What do you mean? I study. I read and understood." He was stuck with me because I passed the test so he cannot kick me out. I think he wanted to give that test to me because of the way I spoke English.

He thought you couldn't pass it but you fooled him.

So he said, "Why don't you give me some time. When I have a job opening I'll call you."

I said, "I don't have telephone at home so can I call you in a week?" He said, "Yes, please do."

So every week I call him and every week he said, "Sorry, I don't have anything." I hate that word sorry. And I'm anxious to work and get money. One time after a month, I was so impatient, I called him. Mr. Martinez was his name. "I want to see you for five minutes."

"Why do you need to see me for five minutes?"

"I just want to see you for five minutes face to face, please."

"Okay on Friday. I have a staff meeting. I have a break. I don't know exactly but you can come."

My sponsor took me. He [Martinez] walked out with a coffee cup and said, "Why do you need to see me for five minutes?"

"Why don't you just tell me yes or no?" He said, "What do you mean yes or no?" I said, "If you have job, you have to say yes and no if you don't have job. And I don't want to keep calling you and you say sorry." He then told me, "No, no, don't worry. You can apply for public assistance because you're a refugee."

That was it! I cry like a baby, and so loud. He was so scared and then said, "Wait a minute. Miss Thuy, please. What did I do? What did I say? I don't mean to hurt you. Why do you cry so loud?" Finally I said, "Sir, I don't plan to come here open handed. I need a job to work. But if you don't have job, then let me know. I'll go back and do something else. But I don't want to ask for money."

So he said, "Oh, my God! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Why don't you give me three days and I'll let you know for sure. Call me back in three days."

And I called back in three days and he got a job for me as a teacher's aid in the elementary school near where I live. I was teaching there for one year and after that I saw in the newspaper an opening for a GED position teaching. I applied for that in the afternoon. The woman who

interviewed me accepted me but before she interviewed me she said, "Can you correct your application? Something must be wrong." I looked it over and said, "There's nothing wrong." She point to my birthday and said, "This is not your birthday." I looked like a little girl at that time. So, finally I got that second job and I was teaching for the GED program.

Then I sign up with Avon to sell their products because I don't have to put down any money. So much of what I made, I sent back to my family through my aunt in Paris.

So you found out that your family was still in Vietnam?

I contact with my aunt and they contact with my aunt. My family thought I lived in Paris. They never thought in their minds that I would be living in America. Then I decided to sponsor my family and bring them here.

And they came here?

Yes, they all came. I was teaching down there for 2 ½ years and met a friend who was a teacher with me in the same school back home. She lived in Lansing, Michigan. I didn't know where Michigan was but I told her I wanted to live close to her. So I went to visit her in the summer and went to the education center and met with Dr. Moore and he gave me a job. Then I moved from Texas to Michigan with a U-Haul in the back and continued teaching for one and half years. It was so cold and there was so much snow. I parked my car in front of my apartment and the next day I couldn't find it.

Where was your nephew at this time?

He was with me everywhere. After that I made contact with a friend of mine who lives up here and she found a teaching job opening in Arlington County. She applied for me then set up an appointment for an interview for me. I flew here from Michigan on a Sunday and I had the interview the next day, then flew back. So I only missed one day--Monday.

After 10 days, they offered me the job teaching for the GED. Six months after I started, the YMCA learned about me and how I operated in the class and how I helped students and so they contacted me and offered me the big job as the director of refugee services for the whole country.

The whole country!

Yes, sir! I thought that would be too big of a job for me to handle. They gave me a week to think it over before I decided and I came back and said no. All my friends point at my forehead and say, "You are idiot. You have to take it because you know the refugee situation better than anyone so you have to take it and then we can help each other. If you don't take it, don't ever show your face around us."

So I took it and became Director of Refugee Services at the YMCA and started sponsoring people from Southeast Asia, and then brought almost a thousand people to the local area from Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam . . . from all the refugee camps. But now I'm retired from the YMCA after 26 years as a director.

In 1985, I was sent to the World Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya and I'm the first only one Vietnamese refugee woman in the United States. We represent the group under the

leadership of Maureen Reagan. Again in 1987, I went to second World Women's Conference in the Bahamas. Then there was a third one under Hillary Clinton but I was not feeling well so I did not go. But I was working with this program and became very well known and popular in the whole Vietnamese community at large.

In 1989 I was nominated and won Washingtonian of the Year because of the work I have done. I was surprised I was picked but people knew about me and that's why they picked me.

I kept working and spoke out and I repeat. Vietnam and America: I love them both. I was born in Vietnam and I was reborn in this country. I saw the picture that Paul [Jacobs] has of the Vietnamese flag and the American flag joined together and it really touched me.

And now I'm married to an American general officer, Victor Hugo. Some day, if I die, I would be honored to follow his way to be buried in Arlington Cemetery, the place with all the heroes who sacrificed for our country.

Where is your family now?

My family came here separately. I tried to sponsor them all at once but . . . My mom came first in 1987 and she lived with me until she passed away at 93. I have two brothers, two sisters. One sister is in California with her family. That's my older sister. My older brother lives here in Annandale. He's the father of the nephew I brought along with me. And he's the first grandson of the family because he came from my older brother. The younger brother lives in DC, and the younger sister lives not far from here in Falls Church.

Where is your nephew?

He's a chemist and works with a big medical company. He is married and has one boy and one girl. They live with his father in Annandale. Eight years he was in a communist prison. The other brother was in a prison for seven years. When they were in the prison, most of the Vietnamese, we try to save money to bribe people to get them out. It's really hard. But this is a peaceful land and it is my land and I will die here.

Have you ever thought about going back to Vietnam?

I've carried these memories around for 34 years. Why now I volunteer to go back? Just to go down with all those painful memories that happen there. Your country is always your country in your mind but now it's a different regime but it's hard to go back and witness again. My husband really strongly would hope to bring me home and show me where he was before and so and so. I still back up like the time I was on that boat. When I was leaving and I prayed to God and promised to myself if any day I have a good chance to go back, I will be the first one signed up on the list but not now. Because all my family members are here so I have no reason to go back . . . or to push me back.

Thank you for sharing your life story with me.